

## Strategic Insight

### The Other "Gulf War"—The British Invasion of Iraq in 1941

by [Douglas Porch](#)

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The present debate over "regime change" in Iraq conceals a little known irony—it offers a cast of characters and a reprise of arguments that shaped an earlier invasion of that country. The invasion in question was not the Gulf War of 1991—rather, it was the British invasion of 1941.

In May 1941, in the midst of a World War, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill ordered his reluctant Commander-in-Chief Middle East, General Sir Archibald Wavell, to march on Baghdad to effect a "regime change." The British Prime Minister's arguments reflected many of those same concerns expressed today by members of the George W. Bush administration: British intervention would "pre-empt" Axis support for Rachid Ali, a violently anti-British Arab nationalist whose government threatened Britain's strategic position in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. It would strike a blow at a terrorist challenge orchestrated by a charismatic Islamic cleric. British intervention also would protect oil reserves vital to the British war effort. Furthermore, Churchill was willing to wave aside offers of third-party mediation in favor of a "unilateralist" approach. Conversely, Wavell's arguments against an invasion of Iraq mirrored contemporary objections—he simply lacked the resources to add Iraq to an impossibly extensive list of military commitments. A military attack, Wavell believed, would make Britain's position in the Middle East less, not more, secure. Better let sleeping dogs lie and take care of pressing business elsewhere.

#### The Sources of Intervention

The story of Churchill's 1941 invasion of Iraq begins in 1930. In that year, the British accorded sovereignty to Iraq, making it the first of the former Turkish colonies in the Middle East to gain independence. But the British retained an important concession from the newly independent Iraqi government. Because of Iraq's important geographic position as an air link and alternative land passage via Basra and Baghdad between India and British-controlled Palestine and the Suez canal, an Anglo-Iraqi treaty allowed London to transit troops through Iraq, and required Baghdad to "give all aid, including the use of railways, rivers, ports and airfields," in the event of war. Baghdad also undertook to provide internal security, especially to protect the vital pipelines that ran from the Mosul and Kirkuk oilfields of northern Iraq to Haifa on the Mediterranean coast. By 1937, British presence in Iraq had been reduced to two RAF bases, one at Shaibah, close to the southern port of Basra, and the other at Habbaniya, on the Euphrates about twenty-five miles west of Baghdad. Nevertheless, Iraqi army officers, organized into a secret association known as the Golden Square, regarded the residual British presence in their country and the commercial and diplomatic privileges ceded to London in the 1930 treaty as an insulting vestige of imperialism.

By treaty, Iraq should have sided with Britain on the outbreak of war in 1939. But the government of the 4-year old King of Iraq, directed by his uncle who served as Regent, proved too feeble to surmount the opposition of pro-Italian Prime Minister Rashid Ali el Gailani, a lawyer and co-founder of the Muslim Brotherhood whose cells were active throughout the Middle East. Axis triumphs early in the war and the arrival of an Italian Armistice Commission to monitor Vichy French forces in neighboring Syria only strengthened Rashid Ali's position. When Churchill's War Cabinet recommended the precautionary

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dispatch of a division from India to occupy Basra, Wavell objected that the appearance of British troops would only enflame hair-trigger Iraqi nationalism. Wavell's obstruction left Iraq's vulnerable Royal Air Force (RAF) bases guarded only by a locally recruited constabulary backed by armored cars.

For London, the situation in Baghdad was just one piece of a complex Middle East jigsaw that stretched from Cairo to Tehran. Following the Fall of France in June 1940, the entry of Italy into the war, and the RAF's victory in the subsequent Battle of Britain, the focus of the war between Great Britain and the European Axis had shifted to the Eastern Mediterranean. And while Britain enjoyed strengths there, most notably the Royal Navy based in Alexandria, its major vulnerability resided in the political volatility of a region that London feared was ripe for Axis exploitation.

Of particular concern to Britain were the intrigues of Amin al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem who had eventually sought refuge in Baghdad after being exiled from Palestine in October 1937. Al-Husseini's delicate features and gentle manner accentuated by his deep blue eyes, trim goatee and soothing voice, camouflaged a zealous and violent disposition. An ex-Ottoman artillery officer turned school teacher, al-Husseini had been sentenced by the British to ten years imprisonment for his part in orchestrating the 1920 anti-Jewish riots in Jerusalem. In an act of misplaced generosity, however, the British had pardoned him and allowed him to stand for Grand Mufti the following year, an office that normally went to a jurist whose task was to adjudicate disputes by issuing interpretations of Koranic law. The British calculated that, because al-Husseini had no following in the Arab community, they had nothing to lose.<sup>[1]</sup> It proved a desperate mistake. As Grand Mufti, al-Husseini was poised to exploit Arab-Jewish tensions that sharpened considerably with the surge of Jewish immigration into Palestine in the 1930s. His anti-British and anti-Semitic venom found a receptive audience among a rising Palestinian middle class, ironically an offspring of economic activity stimulated by Jews, who looked to the Mufti for political leadership. He directed squads of hit men to attack Jewish settlements and assassinate moderate Arabs who urged compromise, men increasingly marginalized by the recrudescence of Islamic fundamentalism. As President of the Supreme Muslim Council, the most authoritative Palestinian religious body, the Mufti controlled appointments to Muslim schools, courts, and significant trust funds that he used, among other things, to spread his message in Iraq and Syria, and to purchase arms.



*Amin al-Husseini*



*Palestinians demonstrate against Jewish immigration, 1930*

The Mufti also benefited from the downturn in Britain's international fortunes. From 1938, Germany, Italy and even Spain stoked the glowing embers of Arab nationalism with radio broadcasts, "cultural" subsidies and anti-Semitic articles that the Mufti translated and distributed through Muslim schools. Palestinian Arabs imitated fascist political organizations and praised German racial laws, failing to appreciate that Hitler was Zionism's best recruiting sergeant, one who actually exacerbated their problems. Rather, they dreamed of the day when Italy and Germany would eject Britain, and with them the Jews, from the Middle East. By the outbreak of war in 1940, Palestine boiled with rebellion —20,000 British soldiers struggled to keep order between Muslim extremists who turned much of Jerusalem into a no-go area, and Jewish militants like Moshe Dayan whose *Haganah* ("Defense"), organized and trained by the pro-Zionist Scots Captain Orde Wingate, led reprisal raids against the Mufti's supporters as far away as Syria and Lebanon.<sup>[2]</sup>

By the spring of 1941, the combination of Arab nationalism among Iraqi officers, the Grand Mufti's intrigues and propaganda, and tensions created by Rachid Ali anti-British posturing had brought Iraq to



the brink of civil war. On the night of 31 March 1941, tipped off that army officers planned to move against him, the Regent escaped across the Tigris in a motor boat and made his way to the RAF base at Habbaniya, from which he was flown to Basra and the asylum of the H.M.S. *Cockchafer*. On 3 April, Rashid Ali el Gailani seized power with the help of Army and Air Force officers of the Golden Square and proclaimed the National Defense Government. He sent a note to the British ambassador warning against any intervention in Iraq's internal affairs and dispatched a force to Basra to deny British troops landing rights there.

The *coup* in Baghdad threatened British interests for at least three reasons: it severed the vital link air link, and a supplemental land route, between India and Egypt. It endangered the vital oil supply from the northern Iraq oilfields upon which British defense of the Mediterranean depended. Finally, an Arab nationalist success in Iraq could prove contagious and subvert Britain's tenuous political position in Egypt and Palestine. Against this potential threat, the harassed Wavell argued that he had his hands full with four genuine crises—he had to coordinate the evacuation of Greece and prepare Crete's defenses to withstand an imminent German airdrop predicted by Ultra intelligence, and put the final preparations on an impending offensive in against Italian forces in East Africa. Furthermore, Erwin Rommel's *Afrika Korps* had launched an offensive into Cyrenaica and invested the British garrison at Tobruk. In Wavell's view, even if had the troops to spare, this was hardly the moment to stoke Arab opinion with an ill-advised intervention in Iraq.

## The Intervention

Wavell's contention that he had more important fires to put out with the limited forces at his disposal brought his deteriorating relationship with Churchill to a crisis. On the surface, the British Prime Minister and his Middle East Commander should have got on famously, for they shared much in common. Both were men of aristocratic lineage. Each was a veteran of the Boer War and of World War I. Each was an author and historian, who prided himself on his prodigious memory and command of detail. Both realized that they were fighting a world conflict, one that required difficult strategic choices. Each had a powerful mind, with a proclivity for unorthodox solutions tempered by common sense. But there, the similarities ended. Where Churchill was a man of strategic imagination who demanded enthusiasm that bordered on zealotry in his commanders, "Archie" Wavell was, above all, a meticulous planner with talent for administrative detail. As such, he was more attuned to the complexities of an operation than to its visionary possibilities. Wavell, though regarded as one of the British army's premier trainers of men, was too cerebral, too taciturn, for Churchill's taste. For his part, Wavell's intense resentment of the Prime Minister's constant meddling in his campaign plans, of Churchill's inclination to set out, from 3000 miles distant, often in excruciating detail, courses of action for his Middle East commander, caused Wavell to shield information from his boss, a lack of transparency that only increased Churchill's distrust of Wavell.

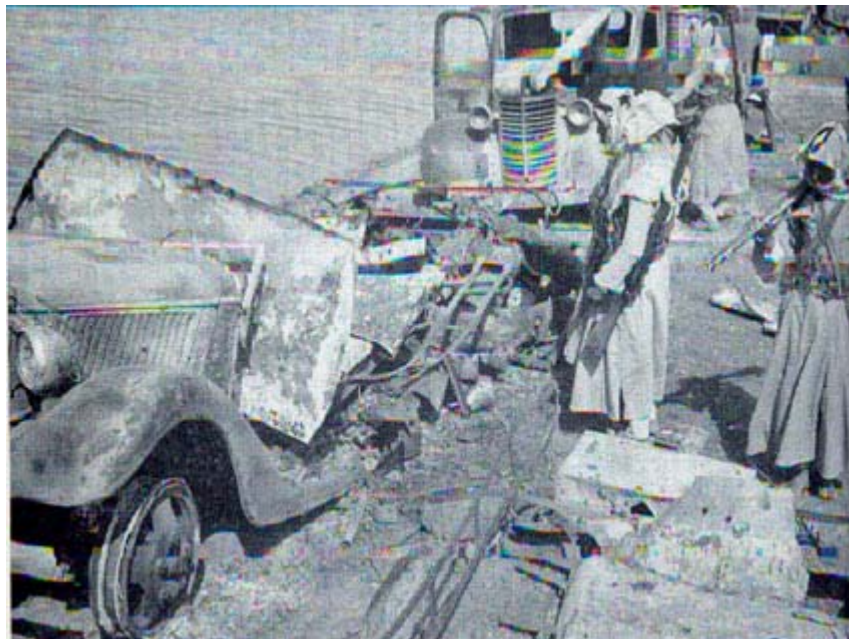


"Archie" Wavell

Eager to forestall Axis intervention and to reinforce British rights of transit through Iraq, on the orders of the Chiefs of Staff in London, Delhi landed a brigade at Basra on 30 April, the vanguard of the 10th Indian Division whose troops were already at sea en route for Iraq. Rachid Ali, who preferred to avoid a showdown with the British until he could solidify Axis support, now concluded that time was no longer on his side. As a consequence, he assembled a brigade armed with artillery to eliminate the British air base at Habbaniya before it could be reinforced. In London, the 30 April news that a large Iraqi force was marching on Habbaniya caused the Chiefs of Staff to exult that their intervention in Basra had caused Rachid Ali's "plot" to "go off at half-cock" before the Axis could organize military support for the Iraqi regime.<sup>[3]</sup> But in the short term, it was unclear who had pre-empted whom. Habbaniya was an airfield that housed a Flying Training School of 1000 airmen, supported by 9000 civilians, many of them British dependents. Its defenses consisted of a seven-mile long iron fence and a constabulary of 1200 Iraqi and Assyrian levies, backed by a fleet of armored cars, under the command of a British lieutenant colonel. An

attacker with even a poor command of tactics would have to realize that the elimination of Habbaniya's single conspicuous water tower or its power station would instantly compromise the garrison's powers of resistance.

Habbaniya's best defense lay with air power. But even this was limited by the abilities of half-trained students piloting a fleet composed primarily of bi-planes hastily rigged to carry twenty-pound bombs, hardly more than air-launched grenades. Fortunately, the arrival from Egypt of eight Wellington medium bombers, a few Gladiators, and 300 soldiers of the King's Own Royal Regiment that were air-lifted from the RAF base at Shaibah caused the air vice-marshal in command to conclude on 2 May that attack was the best form of defense. Four days later the Iraqi force, demoralized by repeated assaults from Wellington bombers and Hurricane fighters flown to Habbaniya from Egypt, retreated toward Baghdad, strafed and bombed by RAF fighters that created a wake of burning trucks and exploding ammunition dumps.



*Men of the Arab Legion look over the debris of a bombed and burnt out column of Iraqi transport*

The Defence Committee in London, armed with Ultra intercepts of Iraqi pleas for Axis support funneled through the Italian embassy in Baghdad, and worried by the Mufti's broadcasts calling for a Muslim *jihad* against "the greatest foe of Islam," obliged a harassed and reluctant Wavell to invade before the Axis could organize support for Rachid Ali. For his part, Wavell would have preferred to accept a Turkish offer to mediate the situation based on a cessation of hostilities against Rachid Ali's promise that Axis forces would not be allowed into Iraq. Churchill rejected this option out of hand. "Profuse Axis propaganda" extolling Rachid Ali gave the impression that the new Iraqi Prime Minister had gained prior support of Berlin and Rome.<sup>[4]</sup> The British Prime Minister had no intention of allowing the new regime the leisure to pull in Axis reinforcements or to encourage imitators among nationalist army officers and the Grand Mufti's supporters in Egypt. Wavell argued the risks of denuding Palestine and Trans-Jordan of its already overstretched and under-armed garrison to invade Iraq to no avail. Reluctantly, the Middle East Commander assembled a 5800 strong intervention force in Palestine (Habforce), commanded by Major General J.G.W. Clark, for a march on Baghdad. However, so annoyed was Churchill at the exasperated tone of Wavell's dispatches and the lack of preparation of the 1st Cavalry Division in Palestine, much of it still horse mounted and lacking anti-aircraft guns, that he came close to sacking his Middle East commander.<sup>[5]</sup>

Churchill's preventative invasion of Iraq caught Berlin without a policy toward the Arabs, mainly because German diplomats and soldiers were divided over the issue of exploiting Arab nationalism. Although it had been in contact with the Mufti, the German foreign office, reflecting Hitler's views, preferred to leave the Mediterranean and Middle East to the Italians. The *Wehrmacht* high command, whose views on Italian competence are unprintable, generally favored active support of Arab nationalist movements to undermine Britain's military position. Nevertheless, the Iraqi rebellion surprised the German generals as they labored to wrap up the campaign in the Balkans and Greece, and put the finishing touches on *Barbarossa*, the German invasion of the Soviet Union scheduled for June 1941.<sup>[6]</sup> French Admiral Jean Darlan, still burning with resentment over the Royal Navy's July 1940 attack on the French Mediterranean fleet lying at anchor at Mers-el-Kébir, the port of Oran, offered to release Vichy war stocks in Syria, including aircraft, permit passage of German war material across Syria, and to provide a Syrian air link so that the Germans could support Rashid Ali from Axis-occupied Rhodes.<sup>[7]</sup> Unfortunately for Berlin, by the time that Hitler was moved to declare that "the Arab liberation movement is our natural ally," Churchill had pre-empted Axis intervention. Nor did the Iraqis further their own cause when they mistakenly shot down the plane of Major Axel von Bloembergen, the German negotiator sent to coordinate military support. Despite energetic efforts by Dr. Rudolf Rahn, the German representative on the Italian Armistice Commission in Syria, to run trains of arms, munitions and spare parts to the insurgents through Turkey and Syria, and the intervention of approximately thirty German and a handful of Italian planes<sup>[8]</sup>, Iraq's five divisions proved no match for even this scratch British force backed by about 200 aircraft. Habforce, spearheaded by the Arab Legion, reached Habbaniya on 18 May, after crossing almost 500 miles of searing desert in a week. By this time, RAF bombers had virtually annihilated the Iraqi air force, and extended their attacks to Syrian air bases that serviced Axis planes.

### Occupying Iraq

By mid-May 1941, the British had occupied Basra thereby asserting their rights under the 1930 treaty, lifted the siege of Habbaniya and at least temporarily forestalled Axis intervention. But how to proceed in Iraq became a subject of intense debate. The Chiefs of Staff in London argued for the continued pounding of Iraqi forces, avoiding civilian casualties as much as possible, to "defeat and discredit the leaders in the hope that Rashid's Government would be replaced."<sup>[9]</sup> For its part, Delhi made a case for a march to Baghdad followed by the military occupation of Northern Iraq, which offered the only long-term guarantee against Axis intervention. Churchill compromised—he ordered General Clark to march Habforce to Baghdad, but at the same time assured Wavell that he would not have to commit scarce forces to the long-term occupation of Northern Iraq until Rommel was defeated in Libya.

The Iraqi army fighting from behind defense lines organized along canals and fields flooded from water unleashed from tributaries of the Euphrates put up a respectable resistance against Habforce, which divided into separate columns to advance on Baghdad from three directions. On 30 May, Habforce scattered Iraqi units supported by Italian aircraft on the outskirts of Baghdad. To avoid the prospects of a house-to-house street battle, Clark opted for bluff—an interpreter phoned Rashid Ali's headquarters with exaggerated reports of British strength. The Iraqi leader, demoralized by the absence of Axis support, panicked and, with the Grand Mufti in tow, scuttled to Persia with the rump of the Golden Square. The British signed a lenient armistice that allowed the Iraqi army to retain its arms and return to its peacetime garrisons. The pro-British Regent regained the throne on 1 June.<sup>[10]</sup>

Britain's Iraq campaign had a sequel. Unsettled by Vichy France's invitation to the Germans to use Syrian air bases, and goaded by Free French Leader Charles de Gaulle, Churchill ordered the invasion of Syria and Lebanon, which fell on 14 July after a bitter six-week campaign. On 25 August, 1941, British and Soviet forces invaded Persia, overthrew Reza Shah and replaced him with his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.<sup>[11]</sup>

### Conclusion

In some essential respects, the current U.S. posture against Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden offers a reprise of Churchill's 1941 crusade against Rashid Ali and the Grand Mufti. Three fundamental

arguments advanced to support the call for "regime change" in Iraq—the need to pre-empt Saddam Hussein before he acquires weapons of mass destruction and the means to deliver them; the requirement to strike a blow at terrorism; finally, a region that contains twenty per cent of the world's oil supply must not be allowed to fall under the control of a demonic regime that will use those resources for malevolent purposes—mirror points made in a different but in many ways eerily similar historical context by Churchill over sixty years ago. As in 1941, many fear that outside mediation that threatens to deflect or delay intervention works to the advantage of the Iraqi regime. Those who argue against a U.S.-led intervention in the Persian Gulf because a Desert Storm II and its aftermath will leave the Middle East a more turbulent place and absorb a disproportionate amount of U.S. energies and resources for years to come<sup>[12]</sup>, replicate the concerns of a long-suffering Archibald Wavell. In the event, Iraqi resistance even against a hastily organized, under-armed, outnumbered and poorly supplied Habforce proved illusory, much as Iraqi resistance collapsed in 1991 before a much more powerful Allied force. Nevertheless, debates in the British government over "how far to go" in Iraq proved remarkably similar to those used in 1991. Unlike President George Bush in 1991, however, in 1941 Churchill opted for "regime change" against a Chief of Staff who would have been content to discredit the Iraqi leadership with a sound thrashing in the hope that the Iraqi people would take matters into their own hands. Despite its inflammatory nationalist rhetoric, support for Rashid Ali's regime proved shallow among the Iraqi people. The same is probably true today; it is unlikely that few beyond Saddam Hussein's inner circle really support the Iraqi dictator.

So, what did Britain gain from its "preventive war" policies in the Middle East? The short answer is that it solidified their position in the Middle East by pre-empting Axis intervention, and bought time to bring a major ally on line, to reverse the tide of war in the Mediterranean theater that in the spring of 1941 was running strongly in the Axis favor, and ultimately emerge among the victors of World War II. But even before the war ended, Britain's primacy in the Middle East had begun to unravel, beginning in Palestine. By the 1950s, Iraq, Iran and Egypt were in turmoil. Therefore, the prevailing historical verdict on Britain's interaction with the Arab world during World War II is that, in its effort to preserve its political base through the invasions of Iraq and Persia, the exile of the Grand Mufti and sponsorship of Zionist counter-terror groups like the *Haganah*, and heavy handed tactics against the young King Farouk in Egypt, Britain fanned the flames of Arab nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism that ultimately compromised its long term interests in the Middle East. At least one writer argues that Wavell was correct, that a combination of Turkish mediation and the threat of British force could have produced a compromise with Rashid Ali that would have reserved British forces for more pressing operations and mitigated the legacy of bitterness and resentment felt in Iraq for the West.<sup>[13]</sup>

The challenge then, for the United States, will be to discover a strategy to translate a "victory" against Saddam Hussein into a war termination scenario that will stabilize a region historically inclined toward effervescence, and so avoid the requirement for a repeat intervention in a few years' time. What the British experience really tells us is that regime change alone is no panacea. Although it can eliminate the immediate problem posed by Iraqi possession of weapons of mass destruction and would probably derail whatever nefarious schemes are being hatched in Baghdad, ousting Saddam will not lead to lasting change unless Iraqi civil society and government are placed on a more democratic footing.

*For more topical analysis from the CCC, see our [Strategic Insights](#) section.*

*For related links, see our [Middle East Resources](#).*

## References

1. Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel from the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*, (New York: Knopf, 1998), 171, 203
2. Sachar, *A History of Israel*, 196-226



3. I.S.O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East*, Vol. II, "*The Germans come to the Help of their Ally*" (1941), (London: HMSO, 1956), 185
4. Majid Khadduri, *Independent Iraq*, 1932-1958, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 229
5. Harold E. Raugh, Jr., *Wavell in the Middle East 1939-1941*, (London: Brassey's, 1993), 212
6. Gerhard Schreiber, Bernd Stegemann, Detlef Vogel, *Germany and the Second World War*, vol. III, *The Mediterranean, South-East Europe, and North Africa 1939-1941*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 591-605. Furthermore, at this critical juncture, they had no way to communicate with the Mufti as the Arab radio operator, trained in Vienna and returned to Iraq with a transmitter, promptly forgot how to use it. Khadduri, *Independent Iraq*, 229
7. In the "Paris Protocols" signed between Darlan and Otto Abez, the German ambassador in Paris, on 27 May, 1941, Darlan, eager to extract concessions from the Germans, actually offered more assistance than the Germans had requested, including allowing U-boats access to French West African ports and purging the French administration of men hostile to Germany. Hervé Coutau-Bégarie and Calude Huan, *Darlan*, (Paris: Fayard, 1989), 395-98
8. Approximately four trains got through to Baghdad before the British blew the bridge at Tel Kotchek. Khadduri, *Independent Iraq*, 232-33
9. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East*, Vol. II, 186
10. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East*, Vol. II, "*The Germans come to the Help of their Ally*", 177-97; Raugh,, *Wavell in the Middle East*, 211-16
11. Both Rachid Ali and the Mufti escaped Tehran in disguise and eventually arrived in Berlin via Istanbul, where they spent the remainder of the war. Neither man recovered his influence. In 1945, Rachid Ali escaped via Belgium and Marseille to Saudi Arabia where he remained until he returned to Baghdad upon the overthrow of the Hashimite dynasty in July 1958. The Mufti actively, though unsuccessfully, worked to recruit Moslems in Yugoslavia to fight for the Germans. After a years' arrest in France, he escaped to Cairo in 1946 where he remained a guest of King Farouk, his influence much diminished after the founding of Israel. He died in Lebanon in 1974.
12. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Threatening Storm. The Case for Invading Iraq*, (New York: Random House, 2002), 56-58
13. Khadduri argues that Ankara, eager to stay out of World War II, had no interest in allowing the Axis into Iraq and as the principal "mediator" would have worked against that. *Independent Iraq*, 235. This view is supported by the fact that Hitler had no interest in becoming involved in Axis intrigues, while Mussolini's desire to stimulate Arab nationalism was mitigated by the fact that he had imperial designs in the region which ran counter to those of Rachid Ali and the Mufti. The counter-argument is that, before the German invasion of the USSR in June 1941, the British had no way of knowing that. The invasion of the Balkans and Greece, the fall of Crete and the active collaboration of Darlan in Lebanon and Syria appeared to point to Axis designs on the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East.